

# **EXHIBIT D**

# **The Similarities Between Kidd Wes’s “Made in America” and Childish Gambino’s “This is America.”**

Dr. Brent Swanson (Lead Investigator)

Marcus Grant (Associate)

## **Introduction**

In 2016, the rapper Kidd Wes (Emelike Nwosuacha) produced a music video titled “Made in America,” in which he explores African-American identity and its relationship with the 2016 political campaign between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump. In 2018, Childish Gambino (Donald Glover) released a similar music video titled “This is America.” In addition to the analogous titles, aspects of Gambino’s performance are strikingly comparable to Wes’s performance thematically, lyrically, visually, melodically, and rhythmically. The aim of this report to detail the similarities between Kidd Wes’s “Made in America,” and Gambino’s “This is America.”<sup>1</sup>

## **Visual and Lyrical Themes**

Since MTV first launched into suburban homes in the 1980s, the music video transitioned from a “representation” of a live performance to another medium through which artists could express themselves. No longer were issues of gender, race, religion, sexuality, etc., confined to and negotiated in sonic material, lyrics, album art and other merchandise. These short films were now broadcast to millions of televisions in the United States. Artists like Madonna, The Eurythmics, and Twisted Sister negotiated gender scripts, while artists like Michael Jackson hired famous horror director John Landis to produce his thirteen minute long masterpiece “Thriller.” In other words, the music video became another type of “text” the artists implicitly (sometimes explicitly) encouraged (even demanded) the audience to interpret. Despite the fact that today MTV rarely shows music videos, the genre continues through online streaming platforms such as YouTube, Vevo, and Dailymotion.

In the case of Kidd Wes and Childish Gambino, the videos are integral to the meaning each artist intends to convey. Like most hip-hop lyrics, the meaning in the video is coded (based on metaphorical and literal associations) rather than a distinct narrative. This requires one to either base the visuals and words on their own experiences or be “in-the-know” (privity to the artist’s intentions). One can argue that the visual content of both of these artists’ videos have little to no distinct narrative, but are a series of images juxtaposed in a dadaesque fashion that, when played in real-time along with the lyrics and sonic material, require the listener to put the pieces of the “puzzle” together.

---

<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this report, the authors use the artists’ stage names rather than their legal names.

The lyrics of Gambino's song contain no story or plot line, nor do they give the audience any major clues as to the narrative of the song. However, the video is filled with various images referencing the history of racist behavior towards African-Americans. The artist makes visual references to the "Coon Face" from the infamous Coon Chicken Inn Menu (0:41) and Jim Crow pose (0:51) used in Blackface Minstrelsy. Furthermore, he references the murder of members of the Emmanuel AME church in Charleston by White Supremacist/Nationalist Dylan Roof in 2015 (1:50-1:57). Each of these is expressed ironically. Gambino poses as Jim Crow (See Figures 1 and 2), a witty trickster character, just before shooting a guitarist (playing kora-like arpeggiated patterns in a major mode – often associated with "happiness" or "positivity") in a chair with a handgun.<sup>2</sup> Just before this violent act, he dances shirtless with different expressions on his face. Sometimes he is smiling, while other times he has a scowl or pensive facial features. He makes the aforementioned "Coon Face" (See Figures 2 and 3) at this time. Further, the "Charleston choir" members are all smiling and singing "Oooh, got to tell somebody. Grandma told me 'Get your money, Black man'" just before Gambino guns them down. The gun is immediately placed in a red cloth (as was the original gun he used to kill the guitarist), which symbolizes caring for the gun more than the people that were just killed. This is of particular interest as it alludes to conservative support for the NRA, which is considered a corrupt organization by Black Lives Matter as well as many Progressive politicians and voters. In this case, the NRA and conservatism are White structures that oppress African-Americans and People of Color.<sup>3</sup> The fact that the cloth is red, the color of the GOP and Donald Trump's MAGA hats, reinforces the links to conservatism. These critiques are aimed at the structure of Whiteness (existing power structures mostly perpetuated by White men and women), which is rooted in America's racist past, one of which Black bodies have been derided and demonized while simultaneously serving as the main source of entertainment.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> The kora is a multi-string zither played by the Jali of the Mandinka and related cultures. The majority of slaves in the United States were brought from the Senegambia region of West Africa, where Mandinka culture is most prevalent. The Jali are known as oral historians and keepers of Mandika culture.

<sup>3</sup> In this report, the term People of Color refers to non-White minorities who do not consider themselves African-American, while Black refers to all non-White minorities, including African-Americans.

<sup>4</sup> In this article, Whiteness does not only refer to White men and women, but those who support racist structures that have traditionally benefitted White men and women and oppressed African-Americans and People of Color.



Figure 1. Thomas Daddy Rice in Blackface posing as Jim Crow.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jim\\_Crow\\_\(character\)#/media/File:Thomas-D-Rice-1832.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jim_Crow_(character)#/media/File:Thomas-D-Rice-1832.jpg)



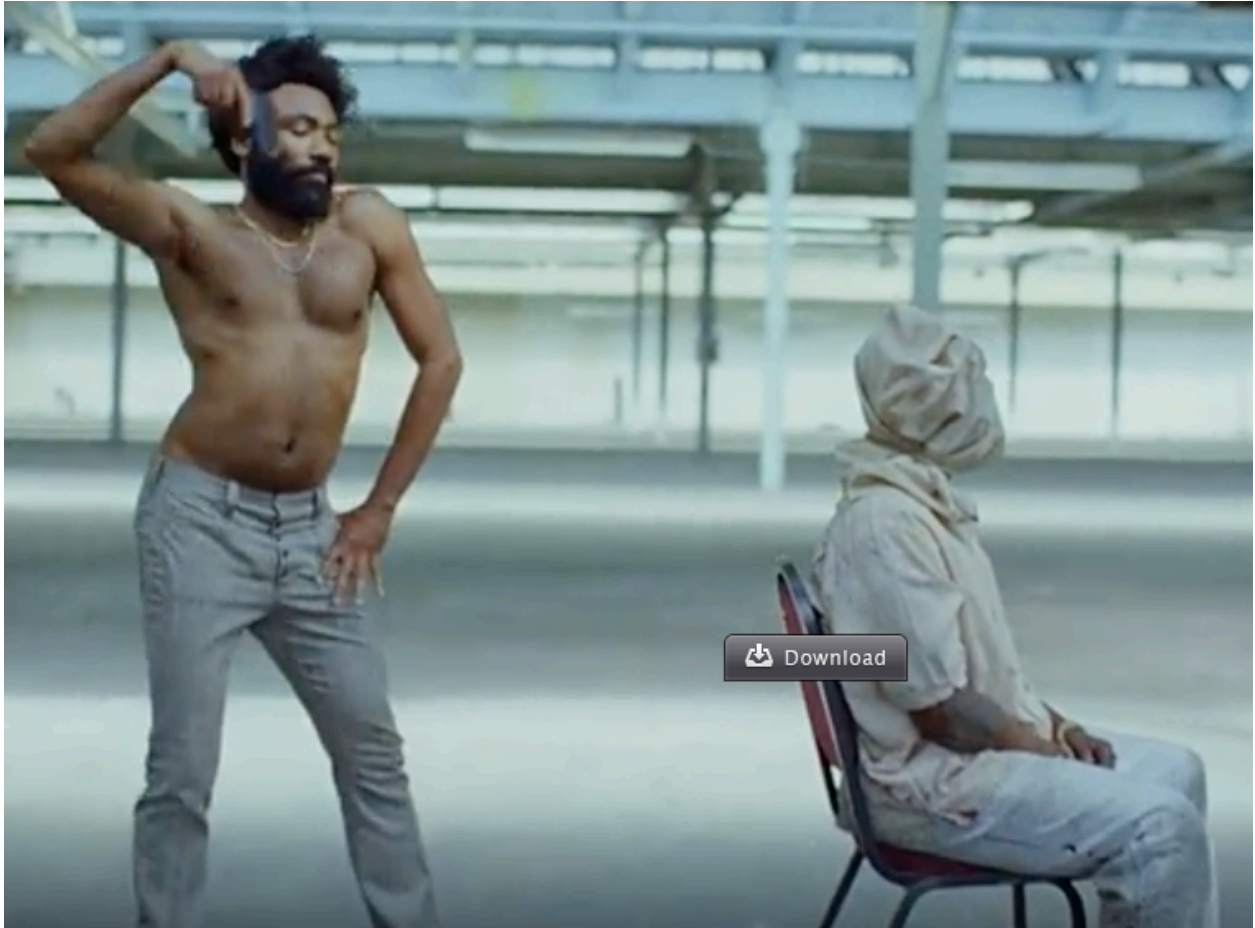


Figure 2. Childish Gambino in a Jim Crow Pose.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> All images of Childish Gambino are screenshots from his official music video on YouTube.



Figure 3. “Coon Face” from the original Coon Chicken Inn menu.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Source: [http://edan.si.edu/slideshow/viewer/?eadrefid=NMAH.AC.1153\\_ref272](http://edan.si.edu/slideshow/viewer/?eadrefid=NMAH.AC.1153_ref272)

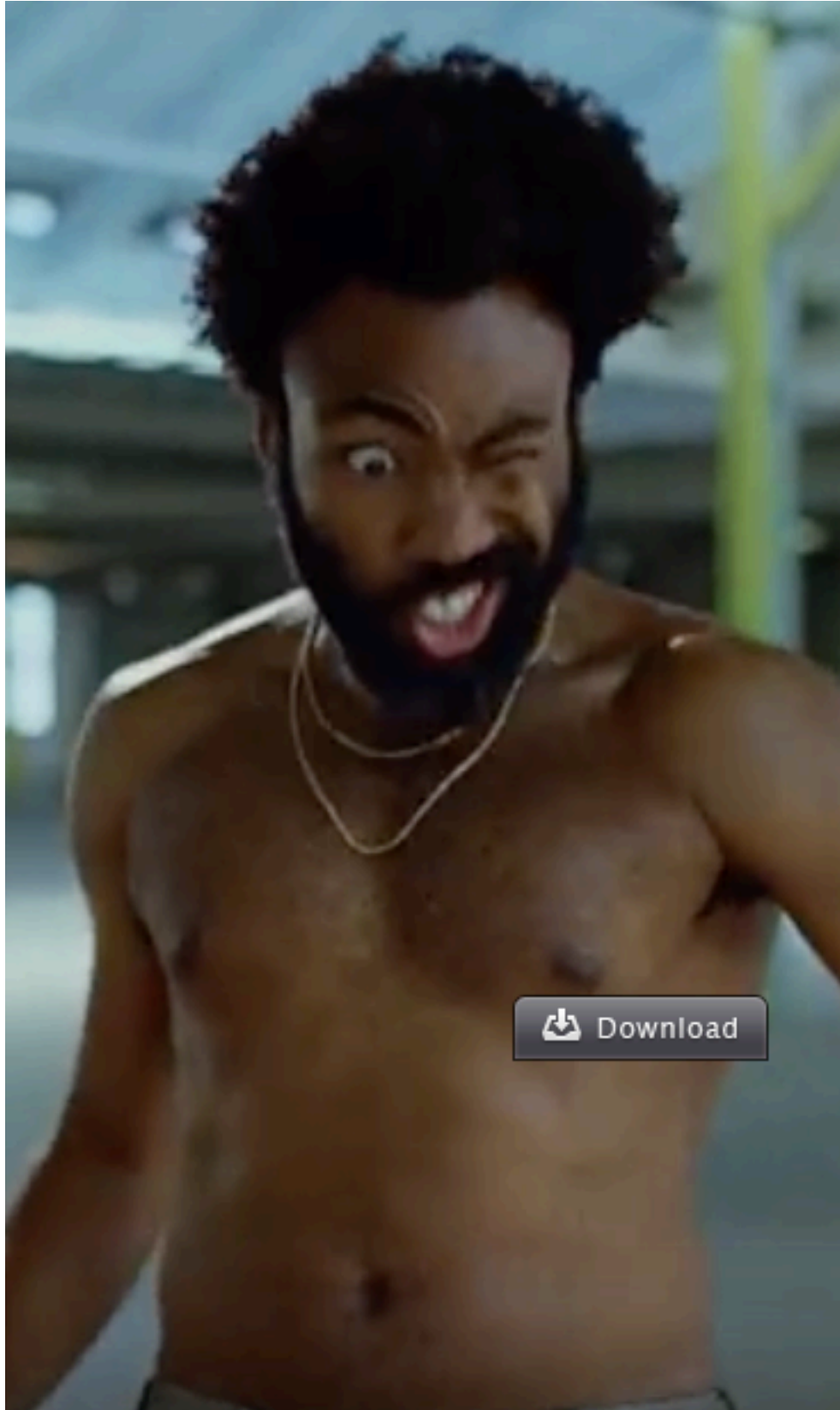


Figure 4. Childish Gambino making a “Coon Face.”



Similarly, Kidd Wes's video critiques Whiteness through mocking the choices of the 2016 election. Much of the imagery comprises people dressed in caricature costumes of Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump juxtaposed against clowns and gangster figures with guns. The lyrics consist of typical boasting/toasting by a rapper (one in which a rapper boasts about his accomplishments), but other than "Make America Great Again," in the last line of the song, there are no outstanding political references. It is the imagery that holds the narrative together, and, like Gambino's video, much of those lyrics and images are presented ironically.

The video begins with Kidd Wes staring incredulously at TV images of news Headlines about Clinton's emails, Trump mocking a disabled reporter, and James Comey pronouncing Clinton's innocence, which is followed by an image of a man in a clown suit (0:06-14). Next, a person in a Trump costume, after staring at a photo of himself with a likely underage girl (an allusion to Trump's pedophilic statement about his willingness to have sex with his daughter Ivanka if they weren't related), is kidnapped by gangsters because a security guard was distracted by a call on his cellular phone (1:30-36). A person in a Clinton costume is then seen looking at "Classified" emails on her Gmail account (a reference to her use of official email correspondence on a non-government server), and is subsequently kidnapped by the same group of gangsters (1:43-48). They place her in the same car as Donald Trump. At 2:01, a person in a clown mask is seen with a gun to their forehead. The political caricatures juxtaposed against clowns is a statement about the ridiculousness of politics, but those politicians also represent power, and, in particular, Whiteness.

As previously mentioned, the lyrics contain little political material, however, they are as ironic as the images. Wes raps in a boastful manner typical of rappers in hip-hop:

Black and white Benz, I'm making a chess move (Unh)  
I'm running the city, I'm making my next move (Whoa)

And got a tight grip and there won't be no evidence  
How funny I OJ'ed the game and it seems to make  
Oh what a relevance  
Pessimist niggas, you should just cherish this  
2016 Rappers?  
(yeah) you should beware of this

In these lines, Wes is jeering at stereotypical rappers and himself by referring to himself as OJ (an Uncle Tom figure) to describe his rise to the top (besting other rappers), while simultaneously warning them to take him (Wes) seriously. The images and the lyrics coincide here. The politicians are clowns, but they need to be taken seriously because they represent Whiteness and America's racist past. Wes concludes these thoughts with the lines "Heads up for the bullets that's coming from the Jakes. Making America great again, baby that's all it takes." The term "Jakes" is code for the police, whose harsh tactics have been lauded by Trump and his supporters. Much of Trump's popularity is related to his promise of tougher punishment for criminals. These tactics and Trump's political platform have been criticized by the Black Lives Matter movement

and those on the left side of the political spectrum. This is also the case for Hillary Clinton, who is known for her past support of harsh mandatory minimum sentences that disproportionately affected (and still affect) Black Americans.

Childish Gambino also alludes to oppression of African-Americans in the justice system through an image of a young Black man behind a bridge with “bars” holding a cellphone. This is accompanied by the ambiguous line “this a celly” (referring to both a cellphone and a jail cell – 2:29). Further, Gambino is running away from a White mob at the end of the video while the following ironic words are sung by Young Thug (3:34):

You just a black man in this world  
You just a barcode, ayy  
You just a black man in this world  
Drivin' expensive foreigners, ayy  
You just a big dawg, yeah  
I kenneled him in the backyard  
No proper life to a dog  
For a big dog

The lyrics deride Black culture in the U.S., and even mention stereotypes such as premium cars with the line “Drivin’ expensive foreigners.” Like Kidd Wes’s performance, this is not a literal derision, but a satire about how White Americans deride Black culture. In his video, Kidd Wes also mentions his “Benz,” which is code for a Mercedes Benz, an expensive foreign car.

Another comparable image is the use of placing a bag over the head of a musician. In Gambino’s video, the bag appears over the guitarist’s head just before shooting him. In Wes’s video, the gangster authorities place a bag over a rapper’s head before they kidnap him (2:28). Each of these acts represents two themes: First, the silencing (representing Black power movements or revolutionary politicians who want rapid and drastic change) of those who do nothing to protest inequality and Whiteness. This is apparent in Gambino’s video when the guitarist is playing arpeggios in a major key (often associated with happiness) accompanying the plastic lyrics “We just want to party, party just for you.” In Wes’s video, the rapper, who is talking on the phone in coded language, represents one of the stereotypical rappers the artist (Wes) consistently toys with in his abovementioned boasting. Second, the criminal acts against the guitarist in Gambino’s video and the rapper in Wes’s video can be seen as an execution (representing Whiteness or existing political system prejudiced against African-Americans and People of Color) of those who have agency to unite and motivate larger groups of people against the establishment.

In sum, each of these rappers uses ironic images and lyrics to protest White hegemony in the United States. The term America here is a metaphor for both the history of oppressive racism towards Black bodies as well as the hope that African-Americans and other People of Color have the ability (freedom) to rise up against Whiteness in the U.S.

## Rhythmic and Melodic Themes

Rappers in hip-hop tend to focus on rhythm rather than specificity of pitch (e.g., being perfectly – or near perfectly – in-tune with a certain key or modality – such as opera or classical performance practice). This not to say that rappers pay no mind to a key or modality, they do. However, the pitches are usually “in the ballpark” rather than consistently singing/rapping specific pitches (i.e., A – 440 Hz). This focus on rhythm over specific melodic pitches is known as an MC’s (rapper’s) “flow.” According to scholar Adam Krims “The rhythmic style of MCing, or “flows,” are among the central aspects of rap production and reception, and any discussion of rap production that takes musical poets seriously demands a vocabulary of flow.... It thus cannot be separated from an exposition of rap genres and styles” (Krims 2000, 48). In the case of Kidd Wes and Childish Gambino, they both use what Ben Duiker calls *total triplet flow* (Duiker 2019). The author defines this as “complete formal units (such as verses) – or rarer, entire songs – where the MC uses nothing but triplets in their flow” (Ibid. 427). Figure 5 below demonstrates the similarities in flow to Wes’s “Made in America” (transposed up one whole-step to match the same starting pitch as Gambino) and Gambino’s line “This is America.” This is but one example of a plethora of times the artists employ *total triplet flow*.



Figure 5. *Total triplet flow* of Gambino’s “This is America” and Wes’s “Made in America.”

In addition to the use of *total triplet flow* by both artists in their respective phrases (and in subsequent phrases), the performance of these phrases by each rapper are nearly identical in timing despite a significant difference in tempo. Wes’s song is performed at 140 BPM (beats per minute) while Gambino’s song is at 120 BPM. The following figures visualize the similarities and differences in flow and tempo in waveform. Figure 6 is a waveform of each audio file (vocals only) of Wes’s and Gambino’s respective songs at their original tempo. Figure 7 is a waveform of each audio file with Kidd Wes’s song slowed down to 120 BPM, and Figure 8 is a zoomed in

waveform of the phrases “Made in America” and “This is America” by Wes and Gambino respectively in their original tempo.<sup>8</sup>

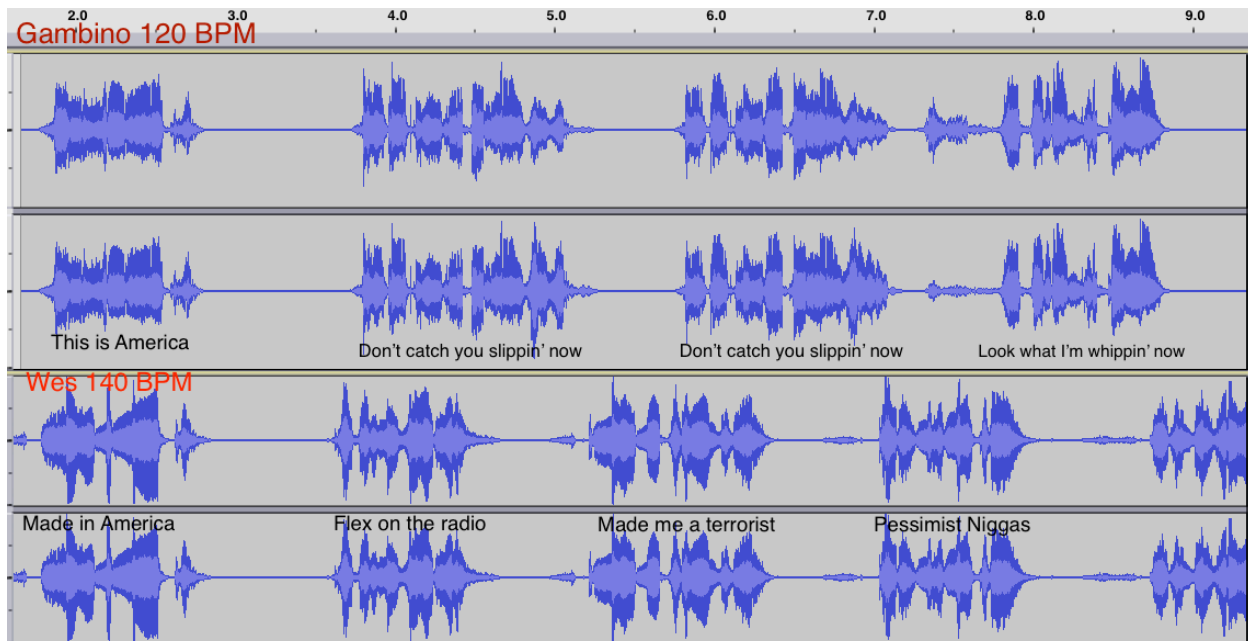


Figure 6. Waveform of Gambino’s verse on “This is America” and Wes’s “Made in America” in their original tempos.

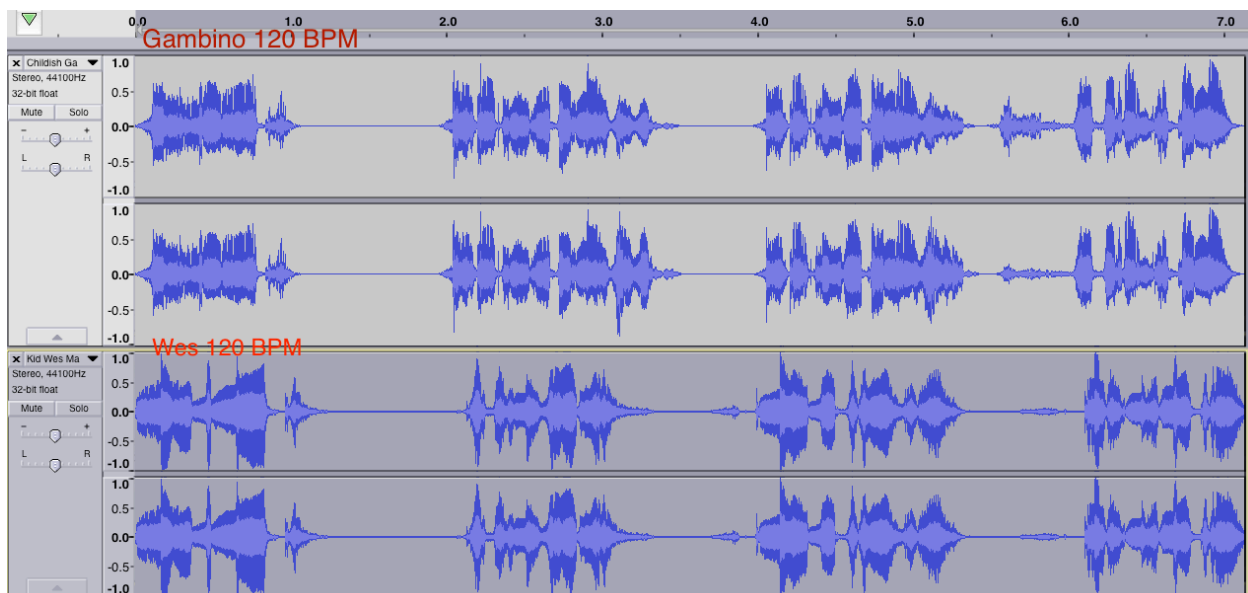


Figure 7. Waveform of Gambino’s verse on “This is America” and Wes’s “Made in America” in the same tempo.

<sup>8</sup> The authors obtained isolated vocals for “Made In America” from Emelike Nwosuacha and for “This is America” from this YouTube page uploaded by MS Project:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZZN1ZnPKrVQ&feature=youtu.be>.

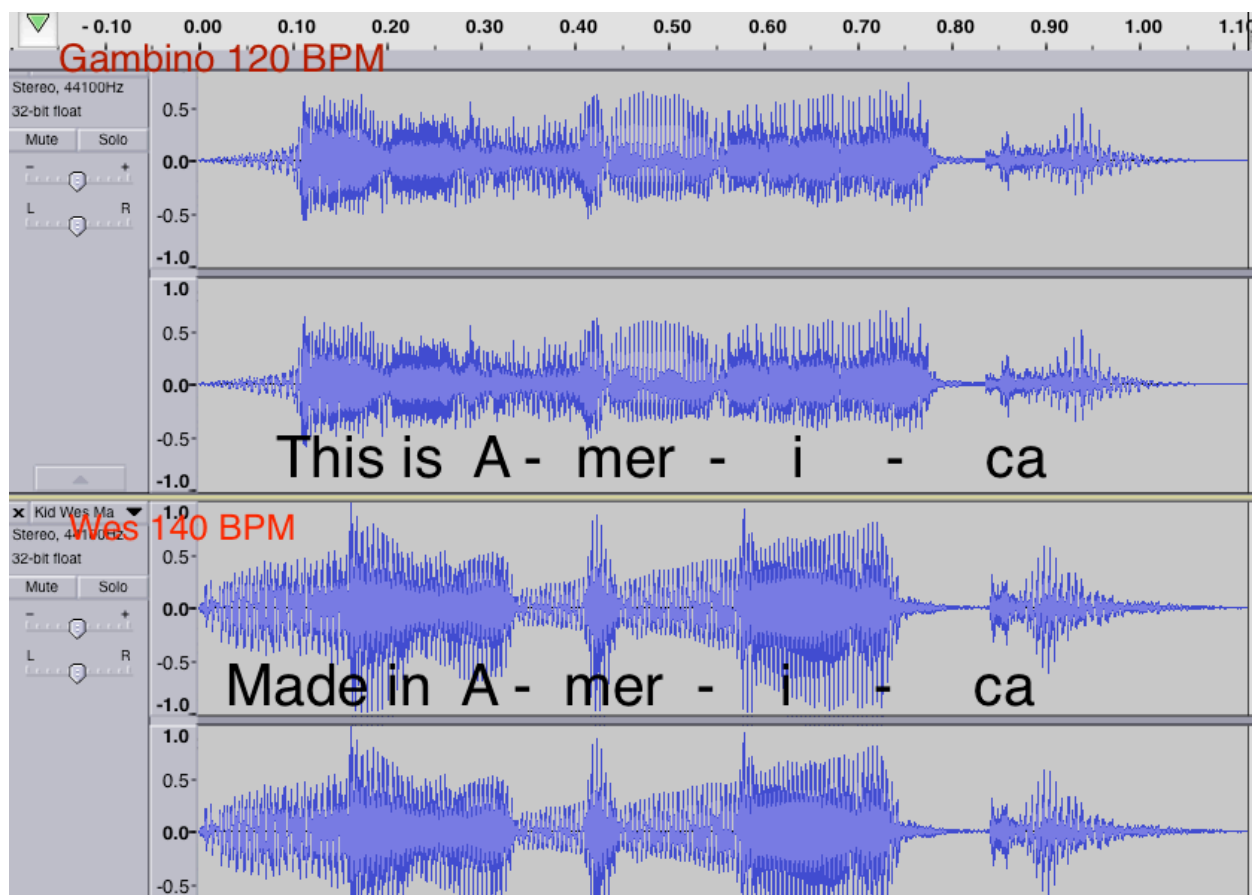


Figure 8. Zoomed in waveform of the phrases “Made in America” by Wes and “This is America” by Gambino.

Figure 6 demonstrates that while the two waveforms line-up in the beginning, Gambino’s the subsequent phrases “don’t catch you slippin’ now” and “look what I’m whippin’ up” come in much later than Wes’s phrases. Figure 7 demonstrates that by slowing down Wes’s vocals to 120 BPM, the subsequent phrases are much closer together. However, Figure 8 demonstrates that despite the significant difference in tempo, the flows of each rapper line up almost exactly; there is only a .004 second difference. This is not discernable to the human ear in real time. In sum, the flow of each rapper is nearly identical despite a 20 BPM difference in tempo.

Another rhythmic device that is part of each rappers flow is the use of rhythmic “utterances,” usually a “yeah,” “uh,” “ah,” or “whoa” after each line. Figure 9 and 10 demonstrate these rhythmic utterances in waveform. The main difference between the two is pitch. Wes’s is a lower pitch while Gambino’s is a higher pitch and possibly performed by another artist.



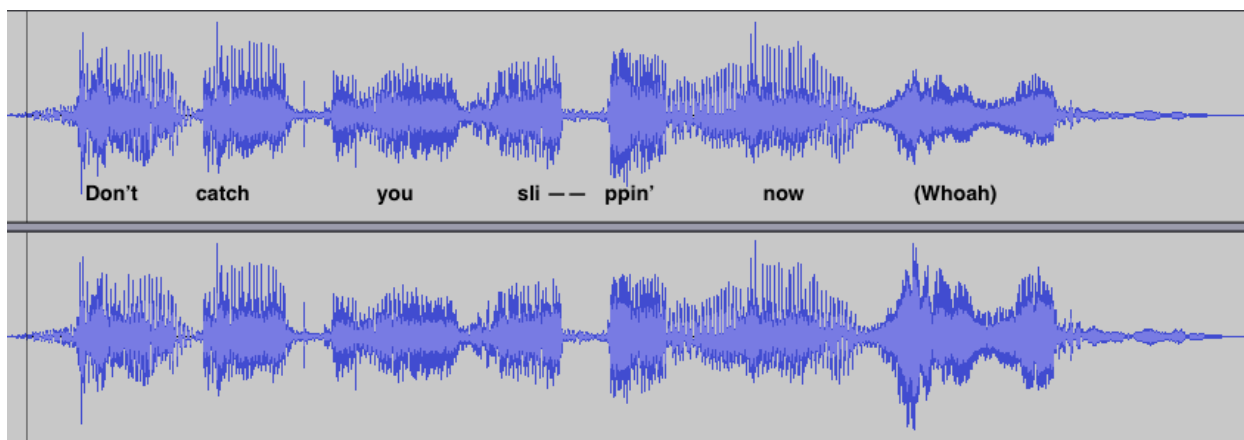


Figure 9. Gambino rhythmic utterance.

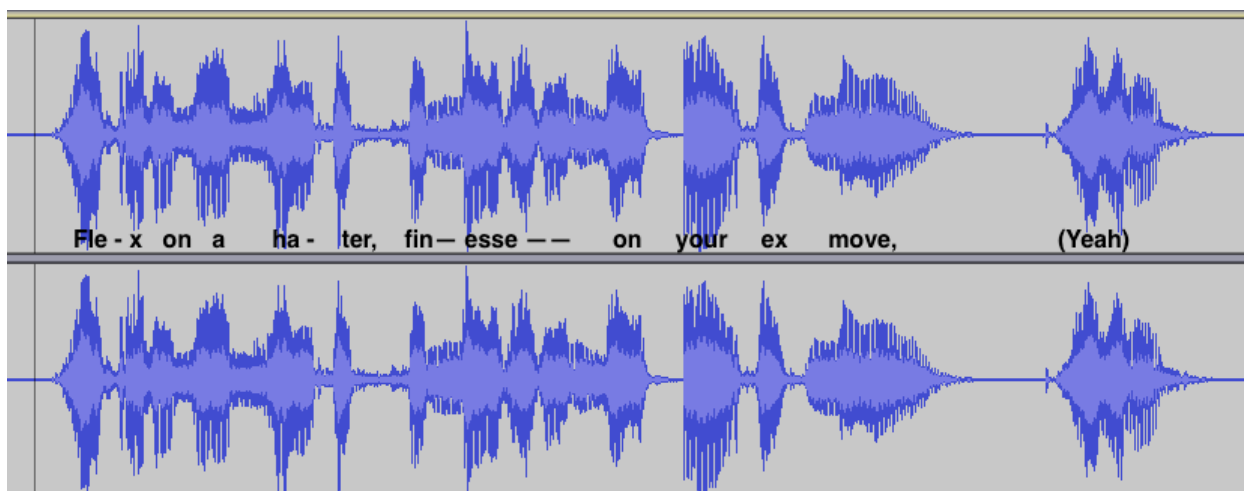


Figure 10. Wes's rhythmic utterance.

In terms of melody, neither rapper is perfectly in-tune, but their melodic contour is very similar. Childish Gambino's "tonal center" is ambiguous for his verse,<sup>9</sup> as the only specific pitches in the accompaniment are in the synthesized bass, which alternates between a D and Eb. Kidd Wes's backing track is distinctly in the key of Cm, one whole-step down from Gambino's. Relatively speaking, the starting pitches begin a perfect fifth above the tonal center (A for Gambino and G for Wes). For the purposes of this report, the authors have transposed Wes's track up one whole-step for a better visual comparison. Figures 11 and 12 are spectrographic images of the melodic contour for "This is America" by Gambino and "Made in America" generated by the SPEAR program, while Figures 13 and 14 are colored spectrographic 2D images.

<sup>9</sup> The term verse here is used loosely, as there is no distinct "chorus" in this song. It is more of a sectional form (A B C D) with the "verse" being the B section.

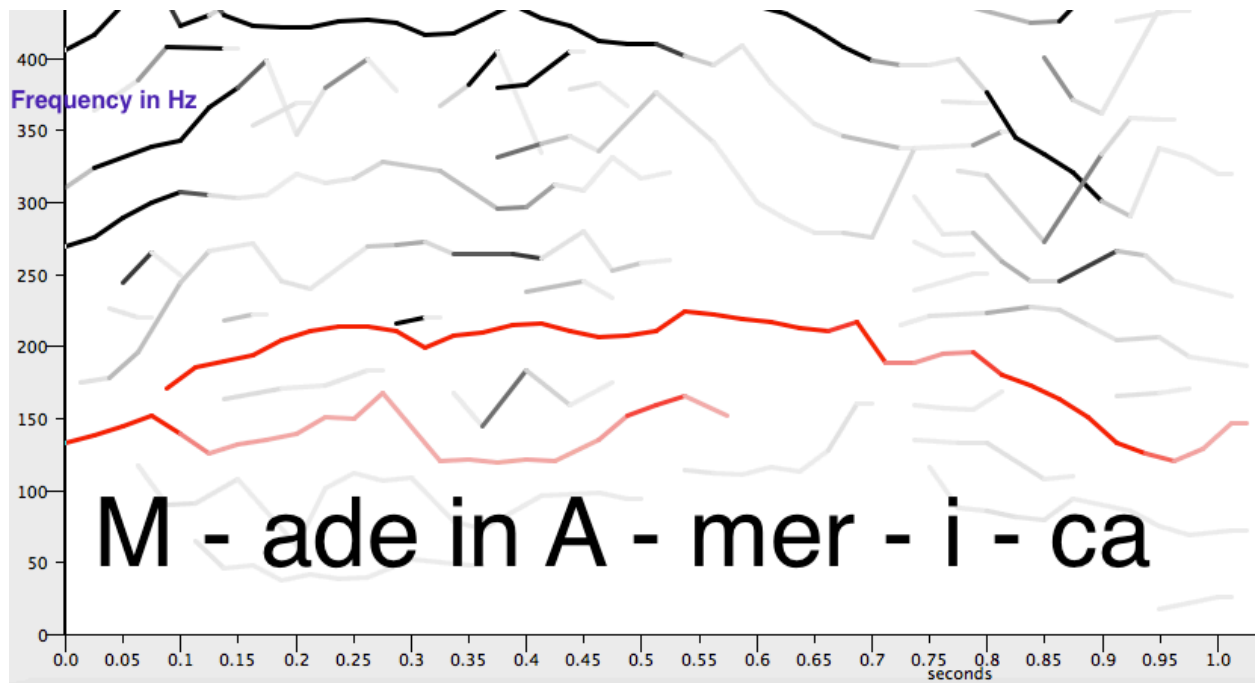


Figure 11. Melodic contour of "Made in America" by Kidd Wes.

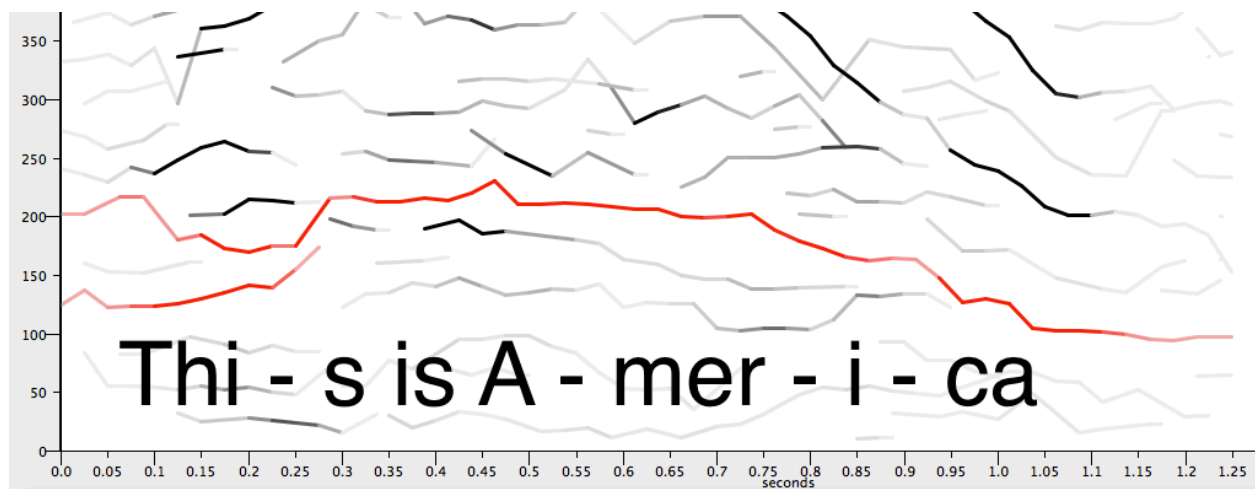


Figure 12. Melodic contour of "This is America" by Childish Gambino.

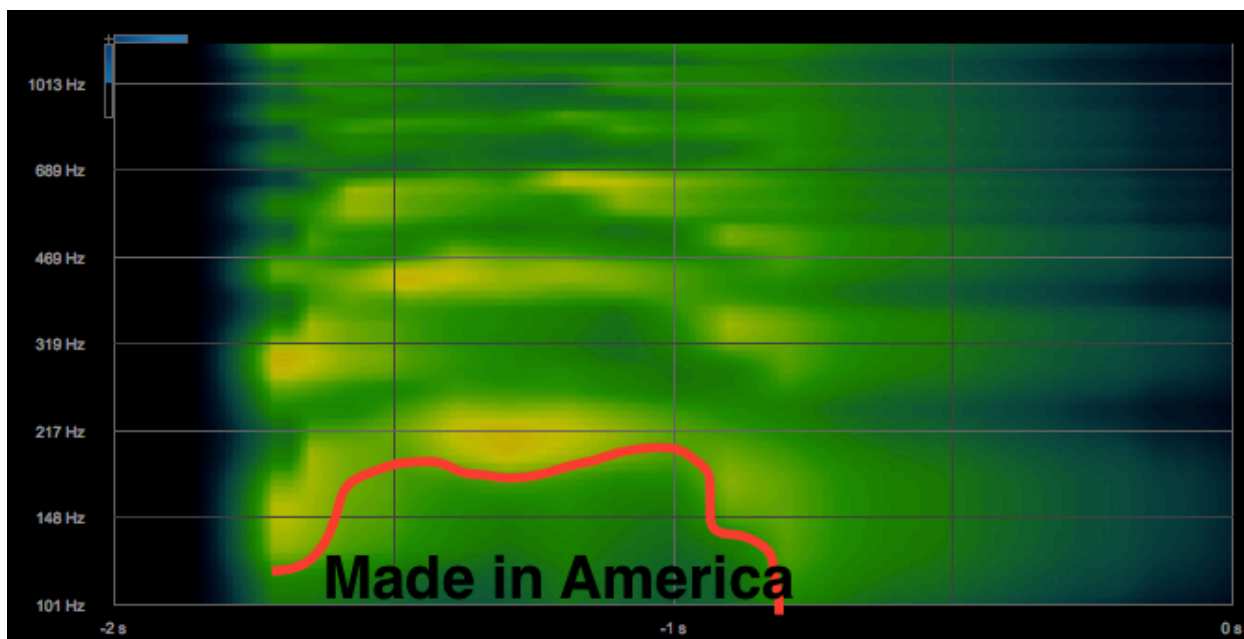


Figure 13. Colored spectrogram showing melodic contour of “Made in America” by Kidd Wes.

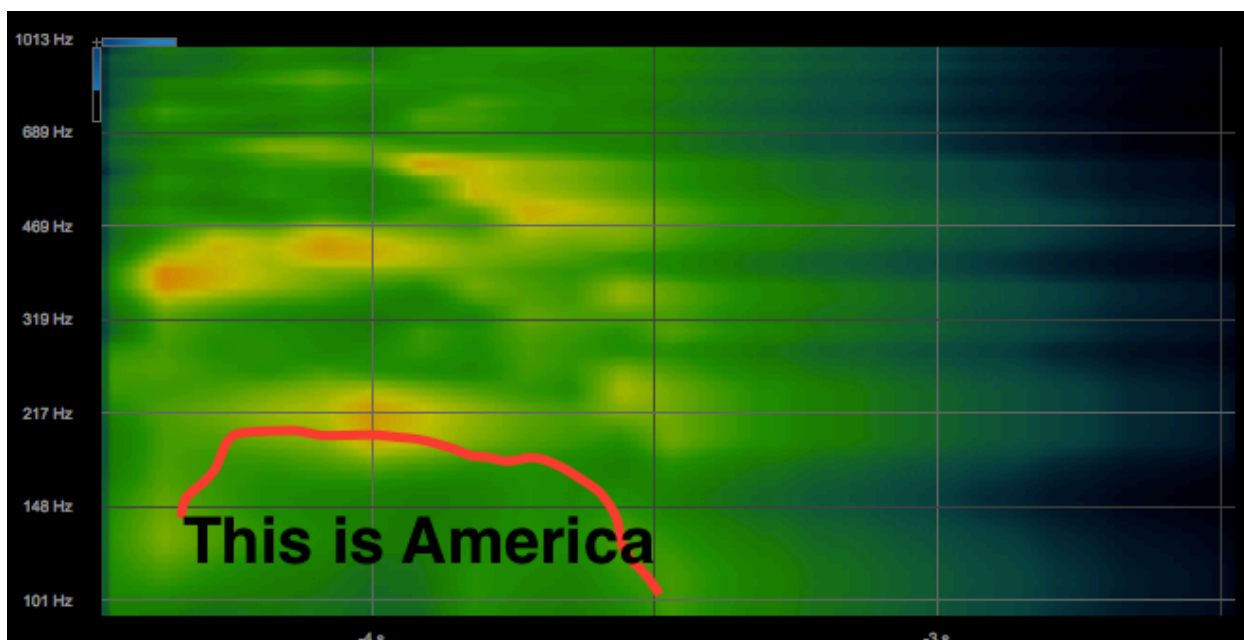


Figure 14. Colored spectrogram showing melodic contour of “This is America” by Childish Gambino.

In each of these spectrograms, the red line shows the general melodic contour for each respective song. In the colored spectrograms, the yellow and red points show the amplitude of each fundamental (outlined in red) and overtones. Because of the subtle timbral differences between Wes and Gambino, as well as the articulation of phonemes (“t” and “s” in “This is America” and “mm,” “ih,” and “nn” in Made in America), the density of the overtones fluctuates even if the fundamental frequencies are similar.

The spectrograms uncover several important details. First, each rapper is never perfectly “on-pitch.” For example, in Wes’s song, the first three notes on “A,” which in a typical Western scale should be 220 Hz, are preceded by a vocal scoop from the “m” of made (starting around 131 Hz) up to the first “A” (213 Hz – 7 Hz below an “on pitch” A). And even though I previously notated these first three notes as A in Figure 5, they vary in frequency from 203 to 221 Hz. Gambino’s performance is not much different. While he doesn’t have the long vocal scoop up to “This,” his first “A” is at 230 Hz, almost a Bb. And in contrast to the transcription in Figure 5, his descending line is far less marked. In other words, specificity of pitch is an inadequate measurement in terms of detailing the contour of the melody. What these spectrograms do demonstrate is that the contours of each melody have much more in common than they do differences.

## Conclusion

This report has detailed the thematic, lyrical, visual, rhythmic, and melodic similarities between the music videos “Made in America,” by Kidd Wes, and “This is America,” by Childish Gambino. The videos and lyrics share the themes of gun violence, and oppression of African-Americans and People of Color by police, the political establishment, conservative organizations (in particular the NRA and the GOP), White nationalism (Charleston shooting), and racist structures in the U.S. They also use of imagery related to Blackface Minstrelsy (Jim Crow, Coon, and Uncle Tom), and deride stereotypical Black culture in an ironic way to poke fun at and bring attention to the aforementioned racist power structures in the U.S or Whiteness. There are distinct similarities in melodic contour, rhythmic *triplet flow* in each performance, and the lines “Made in America” and “This is America” line-up nearly perfectly in time despite being different tempos. They also both use rhythmic utterances in their performances. It is authors’ opinion that these similarities are likely not coincidences.

## Works Cited

- Duinker, Ben. 2019. “Good Things Come in Threes: Triplet Flow in Recent Hip-Hop Music.” *Popular Music*. Vol.38(3), pp.423-456.
- Glover, Donald. “This is America (Official Video).” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VYOjWnS4cMY>. Last Accessed December, 30, 2019.
- Krims, Adam. 2000. *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge, UK.
- Smithsonian Institute. “Coon Chicken Inn Records and Graham Family Papers.” [http://edan.si.edu/slideshow/viewer/?eadrefid=NMAH.AC.1153\\_ref272](http://edan.si.edu/slideshow/viewer/?eadrefid=NMAH.AC.1153_ref272). Last Accessed December 30, 2019.
- Wes, Kidd. “Kidd Wes-Made In America [Official Music Video] (Shot by Gfxkid Films).” [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C7zL\\_OE7gnM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C7zL_OE7gnM). Last Accessed December 30, 2019.

Wikipedia Commons. "Picture from 1832 Playbill of Thomas D. Rice as 'Jim Crow'."  
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Thomas-D-Rice-1832.jpg>. Last Accessed  
December 30, 2019.